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in news

Let it flood

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WHEN THE MISSISSIPPI rises, the tiny Missouri village of Pin Hook becomes an island. Jim Robinson hitches a flatbed trailer to his farm tractor and hauls the town's children over the flooded roads to their school bus.

Nearby East Prairie gets surrounded, too. In town, the water table gets so high that septic systems stop working and toilets won't flush. On the worst days, fish swim on the streets.

"When old John Brown comes in, he just wipes us out," says Mr. Robinson, who farms 700 acres of bottomland. Sometimes he can't get into his fields to plant until July.

It's easy to see why Mr. Robinson and his neighbors in Southeast Missouri cheer for the Army **Corps of Engineers**. The **Corps** wants to finish an extravagant \$85 million levee and pump project that will keep farms and towns much drier. "If we had that levee finished, we'd be sort of the garden spot of Missouri," says Mr. Robinson.

Unfortunately, it's a bad idea, and a costly one. Sealing off the river would permanently damage a valuable ecosystem and harm wildlife. It could kill off the cypress forest in a nearby state park. There must always be a balance between preserving the environment and the good of the people. In this case, the balance tips against the 6,000 folks affected by rising water.

Besides, there might be a better and cheaper way to keep part of the area dry.

America spent the past century and a half channeling the Mississippi and its tributaries with levees and flood walls. The spot just north of New Madrid is one of the few places where the lower Mississippi still is allowed into its flood plain. The natural flow of the river as it spills into its flood plains prevents much more severe flooding downstream, replenishes the soil and provides protected breeding and feeding areas for fish, birds (migratory and resident) and other wildlife. We should preserve as much as we can of what this mighty river used to be.

Area residents say — correctly — that all that upstream levee-building has made their problem worse. Water that can't flood upstream comes rolling into their farms. But in addition to the bloated cost of the project, the ecological price of keeping local feet dry is simply too high. The area contains 18,000 acres of wetlands. It hosts several fish species that are rare in our region. Big Oak Tree State Park would be put at risk. Missouri officials fear that the 1,000-acre cypress swamp could die of thirst.

As it often has, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service adamantly opposes the levee and is fighting a bureaucratic war with the **Corps of Engineers**.

"There is no other area along the Lower Mississippi River in Missouri that supports diverse and rich fish, wildlife and plant species as well as regionally scarce stream, river and flood plain habitats," said the Wildlife Service. The **Corps** has added \$20 million in modifications in hopes of appeasing opponents. It would buy 8,000 acres of farmland and plant a forest to replace damaged wetlands. But that's not enough. The busy beavers at the **Corps** should abandon this ill-considered plan.

Instead, the state might consider a smaller plan proposed by critics. They suggest building a small levee near East Prairie, while elevating roads and improving storm water systems.